

#### ***Strategic Goal 4***

***Contribute to the public health, emergency preparedness,  
socioeconomic well being and history of the Nation***

***Secretary Priority:*** Focus medical research on military associated issues, particularly rehabilitation, spinal cord injury/paralysis, and biomedical concerns.

***Secretary priority:*** Improve the Nation's response in the event of a National emergency or natural disaster by providing timely and effective contingency medical support.

***Secretary Priority:*** Ensure that national cemeteries are maintained as national shrines dedicated to preserving our Nation's history, nurturing patriotism, and honoring the service and sacrifice veterans have made.

VA supports the public health of the Nation as a whole through conducting medical research, offering medical education and training, and serving as a resource in the event of a national emergency or natural disaster. VA supports the socioeconomic well being of the Nation through the provision of education, vocational rehabilitation, and home loan programs. VA preserves the memory and sense of patriotism of the Nation by maintaining our national cemeteries as national shrines, and hosting patriotic and commemorative events.

Two key performance measures enable us to gauge progress toward achieving this strategic goal:

- Institutional Review Board (IRB) compliance and maintain, as appropriate, Association for the Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care (AAALAC) or Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) accreditation or certification
- Appearance of national cemeteries

## Focus Medical Research Programs

**Strategic Goal:** Contribute to the public health, emergency preparedness, socioeconomic well being and history of the Nation.

**Secretary Priority:** Focus medical research on military associated issues, particularly rehabilitation, spinal cord injury/paralysis, and biomedical concerns.

### Performance Goals

Increase to 40 percent the degree of Institutional Review Board (IRB) compliance with National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) accreditation and maintain, as appropriate, Association for the Assessment and Accreditation of Laboratory Animal Care (AAALAC) or Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) accreditation or certification.

### Current Situation Discussion

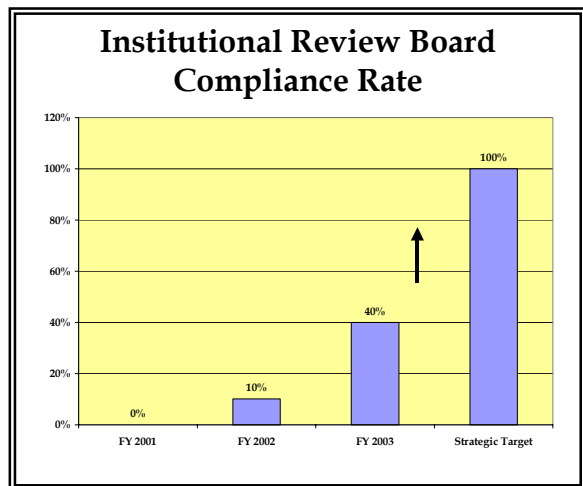
In meeting its mission, the Office of Research and Development (ORD) has capitalized on the unique opportunities provided by the veterans health care system. In response to recommendations from the Research Realignment Advisory Committee, ORD has realigned its priority areas to target more appropriately research projects that address the special needs of veteran patients. The program is also striving to balance research resources among basic and applied research to ensure a complementary role between the discovery of new knowledge and the application of these discoveries into medical practice.

Projects by Designated Research Areas			
Designated Research Area	2001 Actual	2002 Estimate	2003 Request
Aging	470	478	489
Chronic Disease	1,538	1,565	1,603
Mental Illness	169	172	176
Substance Abuse	146	148	152
Sensory Loss	74	75	77
Trauma Related Illness	199	202	207
Health Systems	218	221	227
Special Populations	104	105	108
Military Occupations and Environmental Exposures	137	139	142

VA's research portfolio of more than 2,400 projects has produced numerous discoveries that have improved the quality of health care for veterans and the American public. Virtually all of the VA's research projects are directed toward health conditions relevant to the veteran population. The Designated Research Areas represent areas of particular importance to VHA's veteran patient population.

Significant research results include new or improved treatments, enhanced prosthetic devices, the discovery of genes that play key roles in the development of diseases, and improvements in the delivery of medical care.

For example, VA researchers have identified a promising new treatment for kidney cancer that uses a laboratory-developed analog of a hormone that inhibits the release of growth hormone to reverse cancer growth. VA researchers in



Seattle are developing new prosthetic limbs that will reduce patient fatigue and produce greater propulsive forces for walking. Clinician-investigators found that colonoscopy offered significant advantages over sigmoidoscopy in identifying colon cancer or serious precancerous growths. In a major breakthrough for understanding and treating schizophrenia, VA researchers have discovered a gene that plays a major role in schizophrenia and is linked to two physiological defects found in

schizophrenics and their family members. Researchers also identified a previously unknown dysfunction in neurons involved in multiple sclerosis (MS). They found that a specific sodium channel, the molecular "battery" that produces electrical impulses in nerve cells, occurs in cells of brains affected by MS but not in those without neurological disease. Their work could revolutionize the treatment of MS.

### Means and Strategies

Federal regulations create a system that outlines responsibility for protecting human subjects and is assigned to three groups. Investigators are responsible for conducting research in accordance with these Federal regulations. Institutions are responsible for establishing oversight mechanisms for research, including local committees known as institutional review boards (IRB) that are responsible for reviewing both research proposals and ongoing research. Agencies, including VA, are responsible for ensuring that their IRBs comply with applicable Federal regulations and have sufficient space and staff to accomplish their obligations.

VA requires that each medical center engaged in research with human subjects establish its own IRB or secure the services of an IRB at an affiliated university.

Networks are expected to comply with policies and procedures that prevent and detect activities, practices, or behavior that are not consistent or in compliance with existing regulatory, ethical, or legal requirements. Part of each Network Director's performance evaluation is based on completion or outcome of various compliance measures. Each Director is required to file a quarterly report listing appropriate accreditation agencies for the Network's research programs, including dates of review and conclusions of reviews, and stating whether the Network is scheduled for an NCQA survey (with the date, if so scheduled). Evaluation is based on inclusion of all necessary accreditation agencies, full accreditation by each, and clearly defined plans for any new accreditation that is needed.

VA has also created the Office of Research Compliance and Assurance (ORCA) to advise the Under Secretary for Health on matters affecting the integrity of research protections, to promote the ethical conduct of research, and to investigate allegations of research impropriety.

### **Crosscutting Activities**

Much of the research conducted in VA facilities is subject to the regulations of other Federal agencies as well as to VA's own regulations. For example, human studies funded by pharmaceutical companies and conducted at VA facilities in support of a new drug or device application are subject to Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as well as VA regulations and oversight. Similarly, studies funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and conducted in VA facilities are subject to Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as well as VA regulations and oversight.

VHA has issued a contract for external accreditation of human subjects programs to the NCQA, an independent, not-for-profit accrediting organization that is nationally renowned for its objective evaluations of health care organizations.

Within VHA, ORCA is responsible for liaison and coordination of enforcement activities with other federal research regulatory agencies, including the FDA and the HHS Office of Human Research Protections. As an example of this collaboration, the FDA has recognized the need to revise its reporting procedures for serious adverse events and has involved ORCA in the development of a clearer set of procedures and guidelines. Also, ORCA officials have met with their counterparts in these agencies and are working collaboratively to develop educational initiatives for investigators and research administrators in the field.

### **Major Management Challenges**

There are no major management challenges that will affect achievement of this performance goal.

### **Data Source and Validation**

The numerator for the target is the number of VA research facilities gaining and maintaining accreditation. The denominator is the number of VA health care facilities conducting research. The source of the data collection is analysis and self-reporting by VA medical centers. A site visit is conducted by NCQA every 3 years at VA facilities to ascertain full accreditation.

(For more information about VA's research program, refer to Medical Programs, Volume 2, Chapter 3.)

## **Improve Response in Event of National Emergency**

**Strategic Goal:** Contribute to the public health, emergency preparedness, socioeconomic well being and history of the Nation.

**Secretary Priority:** Improve the Nation's response in the event of a National emergency or natural disaster by providing timely and effective contingency medical support.

### **Performance Goal**

In 2003, at least 80 percent of top management officials, other key personnel, and emergency planners receive training or, as applicable, participate in exercises relevant to VA's COOP plan.

### **Discussion of Current Situation**

In response to the events of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent report of the Secretary's Preparedness Review Working Group, the Department will focus on enhancing its capabilities in the area of emergency management. Within this area, the Department is responsible for the following:

- VA contingencies,
- Department of Defense (DoD) contingency support missions,
- Federal Response Plan (FRP),
- National Disaster Medical System,
- Natural and Technological Hazards,
- Homeland Security interagency coordination and support,
- Continuity of Operations Plans (COOP),
- Continuity of Government.

Many of these objectives, while enhancing the Department's internal capabilities and its ability to address VA contingencies, will also improve VA's ability as a federal responder.

### **Means and Strategies**

The first step in achieving this goal will be the establishment of an Office of Operations, Security, and Preparedness. It will play the leading role in ensuring that VA is prepared to handle any emergency situation and will be able to continue its operations and services to veterans and their families. This organization will work with the Administrations to ensure the safety and security of veterans, employees, and visitors at VA facilities. It will ensure continuity of services, while integrating, improving, and increasing VA's operational readiness and ability to support executive law enforcement,

emergency responses, DoD contingency support, Federal Response Plan (FRP), and Homeland Security support missions.

Responsibilities of this new office will include:

- Executing a comprehensive education, training, and exercise program to ensure all personnel are trained in emergency response plans and procedures.
- Managing, directing, and ensuring the immediate readiness and staffing of VA's Readiness Operations Centers.
- Assisting VA's Chief Information Officer to ensure both VA's information technology systems are ready to continue operations during emergencies and that VA's emergency communications system is effective and reliable.
- Coordinating with DoD on the development and sharing of a database to capture casualty and medical treatment data.
- Planning to ensure that designated Primary Receiving Centers can provide the full range of tertiary care for military casualties and meet civilian disaster contingencies.

#### **Crosscutting Activities**

VA will be working with FEMA, DoD, the Office of Homeland Security, and HHS in carrying out its responsibilities in responding to national emergencies.

#### **Management Challenges**

There are no significant management challenges that would impact achievement of this performance goal.

#### **Data Validation**

Performance data are derived from training records. There is no independent validation of the data.

(For additional information about the Office of Operations, Security, and Preparedness, refer to General Operating Expenses, Volume 4, Chapter 3L.)

## Maintain National Cemeteries as National Shrines

**Strategic Goal:** Contribute to the public health, emergency preparedness, socioeconomic well being and history of the Nation.

**Secretary Priority:** Ensure that national cemeteries are maintained as national shrines dedicated to preserving our Nation's history, nurturing patriotism, and honoring the service and sacrifice veterans have made.

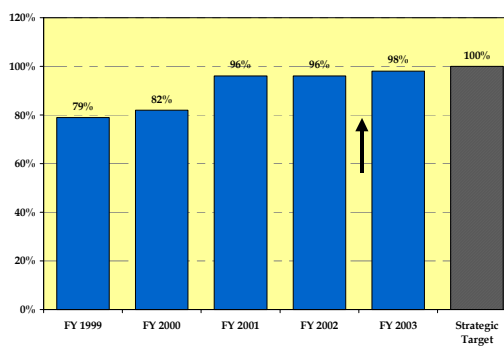
### Performance Goal

Increase the percent of respondents who rate national cemetery appearance as excellent to 98 percent by 2003.

### Current Situation Discussion

NCA will continue to maintain the appearance of national cemeteries as national shrines so that bereaved family members are comforted when they come to the cemetery for the interment, or later to visit the grave(s) of their loved one(s). Our Nation's veterans have earned the appreciation and respect not only of their friends and families but also of the entire country and our allies. National cemeteries are enduring testimonials to that appreciation and should be places to which veterans and their families are drawn for dignified burials and lasting memorials.

**Percent of Respondents Who Rate Appearance of National Cemeteries as Excellent**



### Means and Strategies

In order to achieve this objective, NCA must maintain occupied graves and developed acreage in a manner befitting national shrines. Improvements in the appearance of burial grounds and historic structures are necessary for NCA to fulfill this national shrine commitment. In-ground gravesites (casket and cremain) require maintenance to correct ground sinkage and to keep the headstones and markers aligned. Maintenance of columbaria includes cleaning stains from stone surfaces, maintaining the caulking and grouting between the units, and maintaining the surrounding walkways. Cemetery acreage that has been developed into burial areas and other areas that are no longer in a natural state also require regular maintenance.

The Veterans Millennium Health Care and Benefits Act, Public Law 106-117, directed VA to contract for an independent study to look at various issues related to the National Shrine Commitment and its focus on cemetery



appearance. A study is underway to identify the one-time repairs needed to ensure a dignified and respectful setting appropriate for each national cemetery. Recommendations to address deferred maintenance issues or preventive steps to minimize future maintenance costs will be identified. The study will also include a report on the feasibility of establishing standards of appearance for national cemeteries equal to the finest cemeteries in the world. Varying characteristics of cemeteries, such as cemetery status (open, cremation only, and closed), as well as geographic and climatic conditions, will be taken into consideration. The contractor's report will be provided in the winter of 2002.

In advance of this report, a total of \$10 million is included in the budget to address obvious, long-standing, deferred maintenance deficiencies. This funding for the National Shrine Commitment initiative will primarily be used for raising, realigning, and cleaning headstones and markers and for renovating gravesites.

All national cemeteries are important locations for patriotic and commemorative events. NCA will continue to host ceremonies and memorial services at national cemeteries to honor those who made the supreme sacrifice. To preserve our Nation's history, NCA will continue to conduct educational tours and programs for schools and civic groups.

### **Crosscutting Activities**

NCA will continue its partnerships with various VA and other federal and civic organizations that provide volunteers and other participants to assist in maintaining the appearance of national cemeteries. For example, an Interagency Agreement with the Bureau of Prisons provides for the use of selected prisoners to perform work at national cemeteries. Under a joint venture with VHA, national cemeteries provide therapeutic work opportunities to veterans receiving treatment in the Compensated Work Therapy/Veterans Industries (CWT/VI) program. The national cemeteries are provided a supplemental work force while giving veterans the opportunity to work for pay, regain lost work habits, and learn new work skills.

### **External Factors**

Maintaining the grounds, graves, and grave markers of national cemeteries as national shrines is influenced by many different factors. As time goes by, cemeteries experience a variety of environmental changes that may require extensive maintenance. Extremes in weather, such as excessive rain or drought, can result in or exacerbate sunken graves, sunken markers, soiled markers, inferior turf cover, and weathering of columbaria. For example, the 230-pound upright headstones and the 130-pound flat markers tend to settle over time and must be raised and realigned periodically. The frequency of this need varies depending on soil conditions and climate.

## **Major Management Challenges**

There are no major management challenges that will affect achievement of this performance goal.

## **Data Source and Validation**

From FY 1996 to FY 2000, the source of data used to measure the appearance of national cemeteries was the NCA Visitor Comment Card. For FY 2001 and subsequent years, NCA has developed a new customer satisfaction survey process. The survey is done via mail; the data are collected annually from family members and funeral directors who recently received services from a national cemetery. To ensure sensitivity to the grieving process, NCA allows a minimum of 3 months after an interment before including a respondent in the sample population. Using the new survey, NCA continues to collect information from the families of individuals who are interred in national cemeteries and from funeral directors to measure how these customers perceive the appearance of the cemeteries. This information provides a gauge by which to assess maintenance conditions at individual cemeteries as well as the overall system. The information obtained is analyzed to ensure that NCA addresses those issues most important to its customers. This approach provides us with data from the customer's perspective, which are critical to developing our objectives and associated measures. The measure for cemetery appearance is the percent of respondents who agree that the overall appearance of the national cemetery is excellent.

VA headquarters staff oversees the data collection process and provides an annual report at the national level. Regional and cemetery level reports are provided for NCA management's use. The nationwide mail-out survey provides statistically valid performance information at the national and regional levels and at the cemetery level (for cemeteries having at least 400 interments per year).

(For additional information about the burial program, refer to General Operating Expenses, Volume 4, Chapter 4.)